DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 852 PS 027 414

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TITLE Several Controversial Issues on Early Childhood Education and Care in Contemporary Japan.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; Cultural Influences; *Day Care; Educational Practices; Emergent Literacy; Foreign Countries; Gifted; *Preschool Curriculum; *Preschool Education; Reading Instruction; Suzuki Method; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Bruner (Jerome S); *Japan

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of current controversial issues in early childhood education in Japan. One controversy discussed is the increasing emphasis on cognitive development in early childhood programs since World War II, especially the focus on reading and writing; and presents the controversy surrounding the task of learning Japanese and Chinese characters. Data are presented on reading and writing skills of 4- and 5-year-olds, and various methods of teaching characters are described. A second major controversy involves the confusion about the use of the term "early education," which in Japan refers to education of gifted and talented children, and the term "early childhood education," which refers to the education of average preschool children. Problems in applying Bruner's principles are described as resulting from erroneous translations. Education of gifted and talented children in Japan is described, focusing on the Suzuki Violin Method. In addition, the paper outlines differences between certification of kindergarten teachers and day care center teachers. Yet another issue described is the role of extended day care in Japan, with information provided on the number of children of employed mothers, the percentage of children of different ages attending day care centers, and the number of facilities offering care for more than eight hours a day. The paper concludes with a discussion of the difficulties in integrating kindergarten and day care center systems and programs. (KB)

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Michio TAKEUCHI

1 Introduction

In an age characterized by the importation of foreign ideas and modernization, the first kindergarten in japan was founded in 1876. Attached to the Tokyo Women's Normal School, this was a public kindergarten. Affiliated with Niigata Seisyu Gakko, the first day care was started in 1890, as a private enterprise.

Roughly one hundred and thirty years later, early childhood education programs are now found throughout Japan, though compulsory education still begins with firstgrade. As of 1997, there were 14,901 kindergartens and 22,397 day care centers in operation, with 90% of all five-year-olds enrolled in one or the other. (64.1% of all five-year-olds attend kindergartens;30.3% are enrolled in day care programs.)

Kindergarten and day care enter programs follow regulations set forth in The Fundamental Law of Education (1947), The School Education Law (1947), and The Child Welfare Law (1947).

What follows is an overview of current controvesial issues in early childhood education in Japan.

2 Emphasizing Cognitive Development

Traditionally, the mainstream early childhood education in Japan tended to favor "free" or "open" programs, both in kindergartens and in day care centers. Since World War II, however, and especially during the last two decades, there has been an increasing tendency to favor cognitively-oriented educational experiences over the more traditional "open style".

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A group calling itself "Cognitively-oriented Education" emphasizes the instruction of the 3R's, which, in the case of Japan, means the reading and writing of Katakana, Hiragana(both of the Japanese letters), and Kanji (Chinese characters), as well as the development of number skills. This group is countered by those who favor "Non-cognition-oriented Education", or "Education for the Development of the Whole Child".

There are really two issues here. The first is that cognitive development is emphasized at the cost of paying less attention to other areas of development. The second is that, even within the area of cognitive development, much time is spent focusing on reading and writing, to the exclusion of many other cognitively-oriented activities.

These issues have been debated frequently in recent times.The Misson Reports of the United States Educational Mission to Japan following World War I emphasized the role of language in the intellectual development of the child. Learning to read and write Katakana, Hiragana, and Kanji was viewed as a cumbersome task which may have negative effects on the child's language learning.

The Kanji system, in particular, was attacked. The Mission Reports strongly recommended abolition of this system, suggesting a gradual phase-out of the use of Kanji and the adoption of a phonetic sign system, such as the Roman alphabet uses.

Even given this serious criticism, all three writing systems, Katakana, Hiragana, and Kanji, are still in use today. Teaching methods are outlined in the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (The Ministry of Education, 1998)and Day Care Center Programs (The Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1999).

A nationwide survey conducted by the National Institute of Japanese Language Research (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyujo) in 1967 indicated that about 30% of the four-and-five-year-old children surveyed could read all 71 Hiragana, while 12%

could not read any Hiragana. Current theory suggests that once a child is able to read about 20 Hiragana, he/she will then make rapid progress in the acquisition of the rest, as well as be able to analyze and abstract syllables.

Figure I

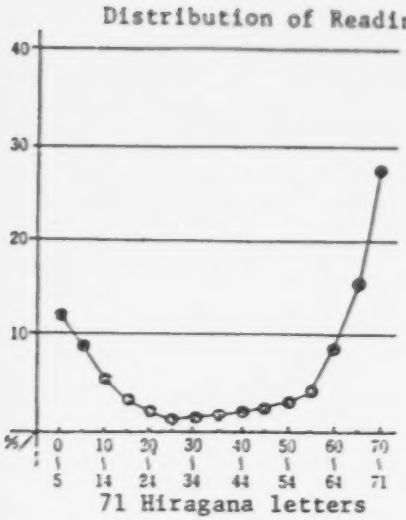
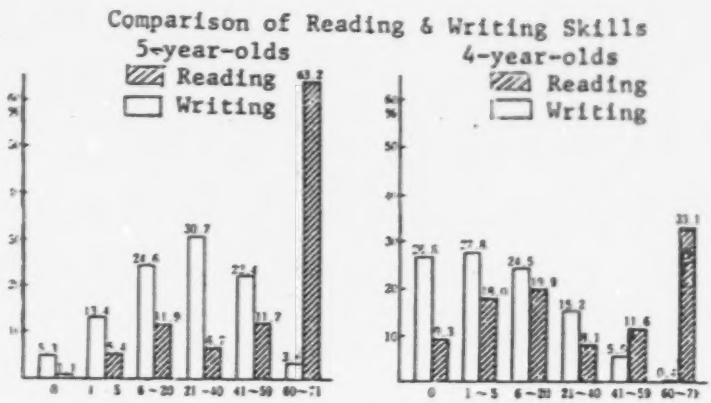


Figure II



Figures I and II indicate that it is more difficult to write Hiragana than it is to read it ; 63.2% of the five-year-olds and 33.1% of the four-year-olds could read Hiragana, as contrasted with the percentages for writing discussed avove.

In supporting the teaching of Hiragana to young children, Kiyoshi Suda, a former elementary school teacher, and Kyohei Fujita, a former journalist for the Mainichi Shinbun(newspaper), argue that Hiragana should be taught through use of a "syllable method" rather than the "word form" approach currently used in textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education (Suda, 1967; Fujita, 1974).

Others emphasize the early learning of Kanji (Chinese characters). Perhaps the most well-known proponent of this position is Isao Ishii, the former Director of the Educational Research Institute of Daitobunka University. According to Ishii, it is easier for children to learn to read Kanji than to read

Hiragana. Moreover, working on analyzing and remembering the more complex strokes of Kanji is good for the development of the child's memory skills.

His method, known as the Ishii Method, stresses the reading of concrete nouns in Kanji, rather than writing, and advocates beginning such instruction with children as young as three-years-old. The Ishii Method is designated to be used for both parents and preschool teachers. Some kindergartens have incorporated this method into thier programs, some even granting it "main curriculum area" status. Needless to say, the Ishii Method has both friends and foes, the former including Steinberg and Oka(1978), and the latter, Kuroda (1972).

The key issue here lies in determining the importance of reading and writing within the curriculum, i.e. are the 3R's being overemphasized in the child's preschool expriences? Is it necessary or desirable for children to learn Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji before entering first grade?

At present, we do not have answers to these important questions. (National Survey of Ministry of Education, 1985)

3 "Early Education" and "Early Childhood Education"

The term of "Early Education" has often been used in reference to the education of gifted and talented children in Japan, while "Early Childhood Education" usually refers tothe education of (average) children during the preschool years. There has been considerable confusion in the use of these terms.

When Jerome Bruner's "Process of Education" (1960) was first introduced in Japan (1962), many people misunderstood his now-famous hypothesis, i.e. that "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development". Many Japanese scholars interpreted this as support for the enhancement of early education(ex. Kuroda, 1976), and proposed

introducing more complex subjects and tasks into kindergartens and preschools.

Bruner, however, emphasized instruction in the underlying structures and principles of a given subject(idea or notion), not merely the teaching of subject content. Above all, he stressed the necessity of a match between instruction and the child's level of development in order for learning to take place. Unfortunately, misinterpretation of Bruner's theory still persists in Japan, often through errors in translation of his writings.

4 Education for the Gifted and Talented

The goal of gifted and talented education in Japan is to help such children develop their special talents, whether in music, art, academic subjects, or other areas of learning and development. Special training is offered by teachers and specialists, both in home and through private institutions.

One of the most famous of the private programs is the Suzuki Violin Method. Now used widely not only in Japan but in the United States and many European countries as well, Suzuki first began teaching using this method before World War I, applying it to the instruction of all children, not just to the teaching of gifted and talented children.

Essentially, his method stresses five points:-

(1) start more early;

(2) foster a positive learning environment;

(3) use better instruction methods;

(4) practoce more often;

(5) training by better teachers.

Suzuki views use of this method, and learning to play the violin, as contributing to the humanization of the education process, as making "talent" accessible to all

children. (Suzuki 1948, 1969, Critics of education for the gifted and talented include Ogonogi 1971, Koriya 1976 and, Nakano 1993.)

5 Kindergaten and Day Care Center Teaching as a Profession

In Japan, two different administrative systems are involved in certifying teachers in the area of early childhood education. Kindergaten teachers are required to have completed two to four years of study in order to earn their teaching certificate. This certificate system is graded, and falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

The certification system of Day care center teachers is not graded.

Day care center teachers, on the hand, need only to have graduated from middle school, now the upper limit of compulsory education in Japan. However, most day care center teachers have completed high school and junior college, and some have attended university programs as well. Regulation regarding day care centers are administered by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. A licensing system distinct from the kindergarten teacher certification process is used.

Recent data indicate the following:

Of the 9,887 new kindergarten teachers, only 9.1%(902 teachers) are the graduate school and four-year university graduates. An overwhelming 90.9% are graduates of junior college or other institutions.(1996)

As related to the use of grades in the certification system, only 12% of all public kindergarten teachers and 4.8% of the all private kindergarten teachers hold first class certificate, i.e. those who received a 4-year university program. This situation is even more serious in the case of day care, of all teachers,

12.3%(24,966) of the teachers have merely passed a licensing exam and 1.4%(2923) are teaching with no license at all (1995 data, 203,350 total teachers).

Needless to say, there are many differences between the kindergarten and day care center systems, not only in how they are administered but also in the kinds of educational and social experiences children attending either kindergartens or day care centers receive. A primary concern at present is to add to the minimum requirements for teachers in both kindergartens and day care centers, making completion of a university-level early childhood education course necessary for certification.

6 Extended Day Care

Typically, a kindergartener spends four hours per day at school, and a child who attends a day care centers is usually there for about eight hours, as regulated by law. Since the 1960's, the number of working women have rapidly increased. With this increase, extended day care has become an important concern in Japan. Issued related to the care of newborns and infants, in particular,are the focus of much attention.

As of 1996, there were 22,397 day care centers enrolling almost 1680,000 children. As indicated in following table (Table I), by far, children of working mothers made up the largest percentage of children in day care (1980).

Table I Reasons for Attemding a Day Care Center

Mother working	94.2%
Childbirth	2.7%
Non-mother	1.2%
Other	1.9%

Table II gives the percentage of children in day care according to age.

Table Ⅱ Percentage of Children in Day Care by Age(1996)

Age	Number	Percent
0	32,582	1.9%
1	137,130	8.1%
2	212,585	12.5%
3	325,299	19.1%
4	407,288	23.9%
5	396,360	23.3%
over 6	190,411	11.2%
	1701,655	100.0%

Despite the fundamental principle that children should not spend more than eight hours per day in day care (Minimum Standard Regulation of The Child Welfare Facilities 1948), the fact is that there are many centers operating for over eight hours, offering extended day care for those in need of this service. According to the National Survey of Day Care Centers conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, roughly 85% of a sample of day care centers approved by governor operated extended day programs(over-eight-hour care, 1996). In the case of non-licensed centers, the percentage jumped more. In the past several years, the number of centers offering night-time care have also increased, with some centers, known as "baby hotels", operating on a 24-hours basis.

Extended day care, and especially the use of 24-hour extended care, raises serious concerns regarding the development of the child, including the meeting of each child's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional needs.
In order to meet these needs, the quality of center facilities, the qualifications of center staff, and the role of the family all need careful examinations.
(Mitsuo Moriya, discusses criticism of extended day care programs 1976).

7 Integrating Kindergarten and Day Care Center Systems and Programs

As discussed above, kindergarten and day care center fall under the

jurisdections of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, respectively. The kindergarten, therefore, is viewed as an educational institution, and the day care center, caretaking facility. The sectionalistic policy adopted by the two ministries has thus far prevented those interested in unifying the two systems, thereby formally including day care programs when referring to early childhood education, from making much headway toward their goal.

Unification plans have been dicussed at the level of the Japanese Diet, as well as by respected organizations in the early childhood education field, including, the Central Council for Child Welfare, the Japan Child Care Association, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

At present, there are several combination kindergarten-day care centers in operation. These programs have not received much support from the prefectural government. For example, to avoid legal problems, the Kitasuma Hoiku Center Kobe, Hyogo is authorized to use separate buildings, calling one a kindergaten and the other a day care center. In fact, the children are not divided into kindergaten and day care groups: all children use both buildings. Teachers at these combination kindergarten-day care centers must have both kindergarten and day care certification.

(Moriya, 1976,1987, Ministry of Education, 1997)

8 Conclusion

Japanese society is faced with many difficult problems in the areas of early childhood education and child care, problems which will not be easily solved in the near future. In addition to the specific issues dicussed above, issues such as the lack of continuity between early childhood education programs (now

non-compulsory) and elementary school curricula, the role of parents and education in the home in the child's experiences, and the underlying purpose of preschool education, must be tackled.

Questions such as, "Should kindergarten become compulsory education and, thereby, freely available to all children?", and "What is the primary role of the preschool, that of education or socialization?" must be asked and, carefully answered.

My personal feeling is that we need to work harder on our philosophy of education, emphasizing the development of the whole child rather than focusing simply on those qualities which seem of most use politically or economically in contemporary Japanese society.

Almost all of this paper is based upon my book, Gendai Yojikyuoiku Ronshi (A Contemporary History of Controversial Issues in Early Childhood Education in Japan after World War Ⅱ) Fubaisha Publishing Co., Nagoya, Japan, 1981

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